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SUBJECT: AYAAN HIRSI ALI: FIRESTORM CONTINUES

REF: A. THE HAGUE 1109

[¶](#)B. "POLITICS IN THE NETHERLANDS" 5/17-19/06

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROLAND ARNALL FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

[¶](#)1. (S) SUMMARY: The debate over Ayaan Hirsi Ali's citizenship status continues to divide the Netherlands. Immigration Minister Rita Verdonk was roundly criticized during a marathon May 16 Parliamentary debate for hastily stripping Hirsi Ali's Dutch citizenship, and Prime Minister Balkenende has demanded that she reexamine the decision. Verdonk remains defiant in her public statements, however -- a position that resonates with some members of her party, (VVD) if not with the leadership. Hirsi Ali has confirmed her intention to move permanently to the U.S. and has put her legal advisors in touch with the Mission to discuss options. While the political establishment is siding with Hirsi Ali in the current debate, Verdonk's tough, "rules are rules" approach continues to appeal to large segments of the general population. END SUMMARY.

VERDONK IN THE HOT SEAT

[¶](#)2. (SBU) The political firestorm surrounding the status of Ayaan Hirsi Ali continues to grow. On May 16, nearly 5 million Dutch viewers tuned in to watch a heated, 8-hour long parliamentary debate on Hirsi Ali's citizenship status. Parliamentarians from nearly every political faction attacked Immigration Minister Rita Verdonk's hasty, apparently ill-considered decision to strip Hirsi Ali of her Dutch citizenship (ref). The only political party to support Verdonk's decision was the all-but-discredited List Pim Fortuyn (LPF), one of whose members, former Immigration Minister Hildebrand Nawijn, sparked the current controversy by pushing Verdonk to re-investigate Hirsi Ali's case following a critical television expose. After standing firm for most of the debate, Verdonk reluctantly agreed -- after 3:00 a.m. -- to reexamine Hirsi Ali's status in light of overwhelming parliamentary support for retaining her Dutch nationality. At a VVD party rally in Hardenberg on May 17, however, Verdonk defiantly defended her original decision, stating that "rules are rules."

[¶](#)3. (SBU) On May 18, Prime Minister Balkenende summoned Verdonk and other senior Cabinet members to a closed ninety-minute meeting in which he reportedly told her to implement Parliament's clear instructions to find a way for Hirsi Ali to retain her citizenship. According to press reports, Balkenende also instructed Verdonk to issue a personal letter of "apology" to Hirsi Ali; instead, Verdonk sent a letter to Hirsi restating the conclusions of the parliamentary debate. The matter is likely to be addressed at the full cabinet meeting on May 19.

¶4. (SBU) Within the VVD party leadership, the affair has clearly cost Verdonk considerable support in her bid to lead the party into the 2007 elections. Several prominent VVD leaders -- including European Commissioner Neelie Kroes, Second Chamber Speaker Frans Weisglas, and VVD Party Chairman Jan van Zanen, and Finance Minister Gerrit Zalm -- have swung their support behind State Secretary for Education Mark Rutte. Even more ominously for Verdonk, the party announced new rules allowing the almost 10,000 members who have already cast their vote for party leader by mail to change it by e-mail. Not surprisingly, Verdonk has challenged this ruling. Party members who have not yet cast their votes have until May 25 to do so; the new party leader will be announced on May 31. (Note: Out of 40,000 voting members, approximately 20,000 have already voted by mail or e-mail.)

WHAT NEXT FOR HIRSI ALI?

¶5. (S) In private meetings with Ambassador Arnall on May 16 and 18, Hirsi Ali expressed shock at the way her case has been handled by Verdonk, and regret that she has once again become the center of a media hurricane. She stressed that the events of the last few days have made her more determined than ever to move to the United States, regardless of whether or not she is allowed to retain her Dutch citizenship.

(Note: Her legal team -- which includes prominent Dutch Human Rights lawyer Britte Bohler, famous for defending PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan and the Hofstad group -- has since been in touch with CONGEN officials to discuss possible options.) The Dutch press, meanwhile, highlighted Deputy Secretary Zoellick's statement at a May 18 press conference in The Hague that Hirsi Ali "is welcome to come to the United

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States" should she choose to do so.

PUBLIC DIVIDED

¶6. (C) Although the political establishment is clearly siding against Verdonk in the current debate, the public is almost evenly split. According to a recent poll by Maurice de Hond, 49 percent of the Dutch population believe Hirsi Ali should lose her Dutch nationality if she lied on her application, while the same number believe she should keep it because of her contribution to Dutch society. And while 47 percent of the population believe that Verdonk's decision was influenced by political considerations, only 35 percent felt that Hirsi Ali's departure would be "a loss" to Dutch society. The perception that Hirsi Ali is receiving special treatment has been fanned by emotional news stories comparing her situation to those of "normal" immigrants who also face loss of citizenship. Verdonk herself has argued at political rallies that there is a "major discrepancy" between policy-makers in The Hague and the general public, giving rise to speculation that she may be positioning herself to run an anti-establishment, right-wing populist campaign in the 2007 national elections.

ARNALL